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ABSTRACT

This brochure explains the process of higher education accreditation, describes the role of various institutions in accreditation, and offers answers to frequently asked questions. The first half discusses accreditation in general and explains what accreditation is, the difference between institutional and specialized accreditation, the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, the Commission on Higher Education, and the nature of the Commission's accreditation standards. The second half of the booklet contains a sampling of questions that the Commission often receives such as who develops accreditation standards and major policies, whether standards are published, how often institutions are evaluated, how evaluations are conducted, who does the Commission's work, the difference between Commission accreditation and state approval, whether institutions ever lose accreditation, whether the Commission ranks colleges, what information about colleges and universities the Commission provides, whether the Commission can recommend a college to a student, credit transfer standards, the location of academic records when institutions merge, grievance procedures against the Commission, and accreditation of specific programs. A list of regional accrediting associations and other institutional accrediting organizations is included. (JB)

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WHAT IS ACCREDITATION?

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CHE CONSIDINE LECTURE IN
the National Association of Independent Schools

to our readers...

CHE
MSA

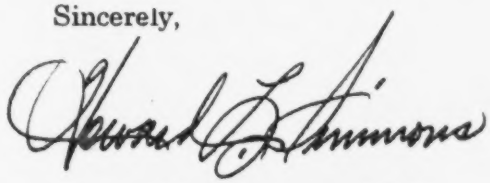
Commission on Higher Education
Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools
3624 Market Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104

The Middle States Commission on Higher Education receives numerous inquiries from the public about colleges and universities. Questions come from employers, professional associations, parents, students, prospective students, governmental agencies, newspaper reporters, and many others. We usually are able to answer these questions—except when:

- the questions involve issues that fall outside the purposes of accreditation and, in some cases, should be addressed to other organizations; or
- individuals seek information that can be obtained only from the institution itself.

This pamphlet clarifies the types of information and assistance which are available from the Commission. You may contact the Commission office at (215) 662–5606 if you have any further questions.

Sincerely,



Howard L. Simmons, Ph.D.
Executive Director

ABOUT ACCREDITATION

Accreditation is a means of self-regulation and peer review adopted by the educational community.

The accrediting process is intended to strengthen and sustain the quality and integrity of higher education, making it worthy of public confidence and minimizing the scope of external control. The extent to which each educational institution accepts and fulfills the responsibilities inherent in this process is a measure of its concern for freedom and quality in higher education and of its commitment to strive for and achieve excellence in its endeavors.

Accreditation is a voluntary process. Institutions choose to apply for accredited status. Once accredited, they agree to abide by the standards of their accrediting organization and to regulate themselves by taking responsibility for their own improvement.

In addition, the federal government requires that an institution be accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting organization in order to be eligible to participate in the Student Assistance Programs in Title IV of the Higher Education Act as amended.

INSTITUTIONAL vs. SPECIALIZED ACCREDITATION

Organizations which accredit entire institutions are called institutional accrediting organizations. Those which evaluate free-standing professional or occupational schools or are limited to specific programs within an institution of higher education are called specialized accrediting organizations.

The most widely known institutional accreditors are the regional accrediting associations. They examine all of the educational programs at an institution as well as such areas as student services, financial condition, administrative effectiveness, and the equitable treatment of students, faculty, and staff.

The Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools is one of six regional accrediting associations in the United States, each responsible for a specific geographic area. Within these six associations, there are eight commissions serving higher education; and the names of these organizations are listed at the end of this pamphlet.

There are also national accrediting organizations which are both institutional and specialized in character. Examples of these are the Association of Theological Schools and the Distance Education and Training Council. A more complete list may be found at the end of this pamphlet.

There are numerous other national organizations that are entirely specialized, and their

evaluations often are closely linked to professional associations, such as those for engineering, law, or medicine. A list of many of them is available from the Commission on Recognition of Postsecondary Accreditation, One Dupont Circle, NW, Suite 305, Washington, DC 20036.

ABOUT THE MIDDLE STATES ASSOCIATION OF COLLEGES AND SCHOOLS

The Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools (MSA), established in 1887, is a nonprofit, voluntary membership association, dedicated to educational improvement through evaluation and accreditation. MSA works closely with schools, colleges, and universities in the Middle States region and cooperates with other educational agencies.

MSA members are located in Delaware, the District of Columbia, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Panama. MSA members also include several free-standing American-style institutions abroad that are chartered in one of the states in our region.

MSA activities are carried out by three commissions which work with institutions at different levels: the Commission on Higher Education, Commission on Secondary Schools, and Commission on Elementary Schools.

While the three Commissions function independently of each other, the Commission on Elementary Schools and the Commission on Secondary Schools jointly conduct a protocol for the accreditation of K–12 schools. However, all accreditation decisions and policies relating to MSA members that are institutions of higher education are made only by the Commission on Higher Education.

ABOUT THE COMMISSION ON HIGHER EDUCATION

The Commission on Higher Education (CHE), established in 1919, is a unit of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools.

The CHE has several purposes: 1) to evaluate institutions of higher education based on standards developed by the colleges and universities in our membership; 2) to accredit those institutions which meet the standards for accreditation; 3) to assist institutions in as many ways as possible to improve their programs and services; 4) to work closely with other organizations in promoting educational improvement.

CHE accreditation is an expression of confidence in an institution's mission and goals, its performance, and its resources. Based upon the results of an institutional self-study and an evaluation by a team of peers assigned by the Commission, accreditation attests to the judgment of the Commission on Higher

Education that an institution has met the following criteria:

- that it is guided by well-defined and appropriate goals;
- that it has established conditions and procedures under which its goals can be realized;
- that it is accomplishing its goals substantially;
- that it is so organized, staffed, and supported that it can be expected to continue to accomplish its goals; and
- that it meets the standards of the Commission on Higher Education of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools.

STANDARDS FOR ACCREDITATION BY THE COMMISSION ON HIGHER EDUCATION

While the characteristics of accredited educational institutions depend largely on the type of institution, all accredited institutions possess important common attributes. These common characteristics of excellence are the standards by which the Commission on Higher Education determines an institution's accreditation:

- integrity in the institution's conduct of all its activities through humane and equitable policies dealing with students, faculty, staff, and other constituencies;

- clearly stated mission and goals appropriate to the institution's resources and the needs of its constituents;
- clearly stated admissions and other student policies appropriate to the mission, goals, programs, and resources of the institution;
- student services appropriate to the educational, personal, and career needs of the students;
- faculty whose professional qualifications are appropriate to the mission and programs of the institution, who are committed to intellectual and professional development, and who form an adequate core to support the programs offered;
- programs and courses which develop general intellectual skills such as the ability to form independent judgment, to weigh values, to understand fundamental theory, and to interact effectively in a culturally diverse world;
- curricula which provide, emphasize, or rest upon education in the arts and sciences, even when they are attuned to professional or occupational requirements;
- library/learning resources and services sufficient to support the programs offered and evidence of their use;
- policies and procedures, qualitative and quantitative, as appropriate, which lead to the effective assessment of institutional, program, and student learning outcomes;

- ongoing institutional self-study and planning aimed at increasing the institution's effectiveness;
- financial resources sufficient to assure the quality and continuity of the institution's programs and services;
- organization, administration, and governance which facilitate teaching, research, and learning and which foster their improvement within a framework of academic freedom;
- a governing board actively fulfilling its responsibilities of policy and resource development;
- physical facilities that meet the needs of the institution's programs and functions;
- honesty and accuracy in published materials and in public and media relations; and
- responsiveness to the need for institutional change and renewal appropriate to institutional mission, goals and resources.

A major index of an institution's quality is the astuteness with which it has identified its task. The basic necessity is a clear definition of an institution's mission and goals. The educational program must be consistent with that definition, effective in producing results, and appropriate to the scope of available resources. Students should be admitted on the basis of their potential, motivation, and willingness to assume an active role in the learning process.

Effective teaching, research and scholarly activity, and public service often are interrelated dimensions of institutional excellence. An educational institution will best achieve the fundamental prerequisites for excellence when it has substantial support through its governing board, administrative leadership and management, and participation by the faculty in developing the total program of the institution.

a sampling of questions addressed to Commission staff

The Commission receives such varied questions that it is possible to provide only a small sampling in this brief pamphlet.

The following examples illustrate some of the most frequently asked questions.

WHO DEVELOPS THE ACCREDITATION STANDARDS AND MAJOR POLICIES OF THE COMMISSION?

Accreditation standards for higher education are developed and approved by the members of the Middle States Association that are accredited by the Commission on Higher Education. These members also approve all major policies.

In addition, the federal government and state regulatory agencies sometimes establish additional requirements.

ARE THE COMMISSION'S STANDARDS PUBLISHED?

Yes. The Commission's standards are published in a booklet titled *Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education: Standards for Accreditation*, which lists the standards and provides a detailed explanation of each standard. The list of standards is included at the end of this pamphlet. Copies of the complete text of *Characteristics of Excellence* are available from the Commission office.

Additional CHE policy statements and other publications relate directly to these standards and may be obtained by requesting a Publications Order Form.

HOW OFTEN IS A COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY EVALUATED AND HOW DO YOU DETERMINE WHETHER IT MEETS ACCREDITATION STANDARDS?

CHE member institutions normally are evaluated every five years, but special circumstances may require more frequent evaluations. The pattern for evaluation is similar to that of other regional accrediting organizations:

1) Through a process known as self-study, an institution first evaluates itself to determine how well it is meeting its own goals and the CHE standards. A cross-section of the campus community is expected to participate in this process, which results in a detailed report called a Self-Study Report. The report forms the basis for the CHE's evaluation.

2) The CHE appoints a team of expert evaluators drawn from other higher educational institutions. The team reads the Self-Study Report, visits the institution to gather more comprehensive information, and summarizes its findings in a written Team Report. The Team Report assesses whether the institution is meeting 1) its own mission and goals as described in the self-study and 2) CHE standards as described in *Characteristics of Excellence.*

A separate document, called the Chair's Brief, is addressed only to the Commission on Higher Education. The Brief summarizes the chief points in the Team Report and

makes a formal recommendation on the institution's accreditation.

3) The Self-Study Report, the Team Report, the Chair's Brief, and the institution's response to the written Team Report are reviewed by a committee of the Commission on Higher Education and then by the full Commission, which takes official action on the institution's accreditation.

In the fifth year after an on-site evaluation, institutions are reviewed again through a Periodic Review Report (PRR). In the PRR, the institution appraises its past and present status as well as its future prospects. It includes a description of how the institution responded to any recommendations made by the institution in its own Self-Study Report, by the visiting team that evaluated the institution, and by the Commission. On-site reviews and periodic reviews alternate on a five-year cycle.

Some of the special circumstances that may result in more frequent evaluations include major changes at the institution which affect its daily operations or the creation of new degree programs, departments, or branch campuses.

The Commission is not permitted by its Bylaws to release these reports to the public. The only official document about the accredited status of an institution is the "Statement of Affiliation Status," which is described on page 17.

WHO CARRIES OUT THE COMMISSION'S WORK?

The Commission's work is accomplished by several important groups, all of whom—except for the Commission staff—are volunteers.

- **Commissioners** make up the decision and policy-making body of the CHE. They are responsible for making decisions on the accreditation of institutions and for formulating Commission policies.
- **CHE evaluators** are individuals with experience and expertise, selected from institutions of higher education within the region and sometimes from outside the region. These evaluation teams conduct site visits and perform other tasks, such as reading reports and making special visits.
- **CHE staff** are full-time personnel who carry out the Commission's daily operations. They provide assistance to institutions and oversee all accreditation procedures.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CHE ACCREDITATION AND STATE APPROVAL?

State education agencies, which grant legal authority to operate and confer degrees, have regulations that must be met before an institution is permitted to operate.

These regulations set minimum standards designed to protect consumers.

The Commission on Higher Education, on the other hand, sets standards above these minimums, expecting and encouraging institutions to improve their effectiveness and to work continuously toward the highest possible educational excellence.

Although the Commission's standards are set above state minimums, it should be noted that institutions must have state approval in order to be eligible for CHE accreditation.

DO INSTITUTIONS EVER LOSE ACCREDITATION?

Yes, but only after careful review to ensure due process for the institution. When an institution fails to meet Commission standards, the CHE may decide to defer a decision on an institution's accreditation, providing an opportunity for the institution to correct its problems within a limited period of time.

In extreme cases the institution may be asked to "show cause" why its accreditation should not be removed and given a limited period of time in which to respond to the Commission's concerns. If serious problems remain uncorrected, the institution may lose its accreditation. Institutions have the right to appeal a Commission decision. During the appeal process, the institution retains its accredited status.

DOES THE COMMISSION RANK COLLEGES?

● No. American colleges and universities are so varied in their purposes, types of programs offered, and students served that it is not possible to offer a valid general ranking of institutions based on educational quality. While accreditation does not provide a basis for ranking institutions, it does seek to establish a level of acceptable quality for all accredited institutions; and institutions are judged by how effectively they meet their stated missions as well as CHE standards.

IF THE COMMISSION DOES NOT PROVIDE A RANKING OF COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES, WHAT KINDS OF INFORMATION DOES IT PROVIDE?

● Information about MSA member institutions is published annually in a comprehensive Directory which includes the following data:

- Name of institution, address, phone number
- Name of chief executive officer
- Type of institution (two-year, liberal arts, professional, etc.)
- Date of initial accreditation
- Date of most recent reaccreditation and whether is was the result of reviewing a self-study or a periodic review report

- Enrollment figures
- Control and affiliation (public, private profit, non-profit).

Additional information, not published in the Directory, is available upon a written request for an institution's "Statement of Affiliation Status." This information includes:

- Date of next scheduled review
- Date of and reasons for most recent Commission action
- If an institution has chosen to appeal a decision by the Commission on Higher Education, the date of and reasons for the appeal
- Date of withdrawal of accreditation and reasons for this action

Individuals who seek information about such internal matters, such as personnel issues, are encouraged to contact the institution itself. The Commission on Higher Education will not discuss concerns that are not clearly related to an accreditation action taken by the Commission.

CAN THE COMMISSION RECOMMEND A COLLEGE TO A STUDENT?

● No. The selection of a college is an individual decision, based on each student's needs, interests and goals. There are so many different types of institutions (small, large, urban, rural, public, private,

church-related, career-oriented, etc.) that matching the student's interest and abilities to the characteristics of a college requires detailed information about the student.

Information about colleges is found in various reference books and directories (available in many libraries), and students are advised to consult with counselors or advisors in secondary schools and to visit the campus whenever possible. Students also should consult the admissions officers at colleges in which they are interested.

IF A STUDENT WISHES TO TRANSFER TO ANOTHER COLLEGE, WILL THAT COLLEGE ACCEPT THE CREDITS THE STUDENT HAS ALREADY EARNED?

There is only one way for you to find out which credits (if any) a college will accept: you must contact the college. Each institution makes its own decisions about transfer credits, and they may take into account a variety of factors: how well the credits you earned at another institution fit the requirements for the program you wish to pursue; the grade you received in the course(s) you took; whether the college you attended is accredited; and other factors that vary from one institution to another. If you know in advance that you may wish to transfer to another institution after a certain period of time, you should contact the receiving institution as soon as possible about the transferability of your credits.

For further information about transfer, you may wish to consult the Commission's policy on "Transfer and Articulation."

WHAT HAPPENS TO STUDENT RECORDS WHEN A COLLEGE CLOSES OR MERGES WITH ANOTHER INSTITUTION?

- The closing institution arranges with the state department of higher education or other appropriate agency to file all academic records as well as financial aid information. If the college merges with another institution, arrangements are made with that institution to receive the records. Students should receive a notice from the college about any arrangements made for filing student records.

Sometimes students wish to know about where their records are filed longer after an institution has closed. In that case, students should begin their inquiries by contacting the higher education agency in the state where the institution was authorized.

DOES THE COMMISSION HANDLE COMPLAINTS OR OTHER KINDS OF GRIEVANCES AGAINST INSTITUTIONS?

- The Commission receives complaints about ***substantive*** matters that are related to the ***quality*** of the institution or its academic programs. All such complaints are judged against the Commission's standards in *Characteristics of Excellence*.

Complaints must be written, signed, and addressed to the Executive Director of the Commission. However, the Commission investigates these complaints only when the complainant has exhausted ***all*** of the institution's appeal procedures. A copy of the policy, "Review of Complaints Involving Affiliated Institutions," is available from the CHE office.

The Commission is not a judicial or quasi-judicial body, and therefore ***cannot*** settle disputes between individuals and institutions, whether these involve students, faculty, administration, or members of other groups. Examples of these would be a student's complaint about a grade received from a faculty member or a faculty member's complaint about his or her hiring or continued employment.

HOW ARE COMPLAINTS AGAINST THE COMMISSION HANDLED?

- Individuals or institutions that have complaints against the Commission itself should contact the appropriate federal or state agencies or the Commission on Recognition of Postsecondary Accreditation, whose addresses are listed in the back of this pamphlet.

DOES THE COMMISSION ACCREDIT SPECIFIC PROGRAMS, SUCH AS LIBRARY SCIENCE OR JOURNALISM?

- No. The Commission does not accredit specific programs; we accredit institutions as a whole. We review specific programs as part of the evaluation of an entire institution, and such programs are covered by the institutional accreditation.

Some institutions, however, choose to seek additional recognition by specialized organizations for some of their programs, such as those in library science, journalism, nursing.

REGIONAL ACCREDITING ASSOCIATIONS

Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools

Commission on Higher Education
3624 Market Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104
(215) 662–5606
Dr. Howard L. Simmons, Executive Director

New England Association of Schools and Colleges

Commission on Institutions of Higher Education
209 Burlington Road, Bedford, MA 01730–1433
(617) 271–0022
Dr. Charles M. Cook, Director

Commission on Technical and Career Institutions
209 Burlington Road, Bedford, MA 01730–1433
(617) 271–0022
Dr. Richard E. Mandeville, Director

North Central Association of Colleges and Schools

Commission on Institutions of Higher Education
30 North LaSalle, Suite 2400, Chicago, IL 60602
(800) 621–7440
Dr. Patricia A. Thrash, Executive Director

Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges

Commission on Colleges
3700-B University Way, N.E., Seattle, WA 98105
(206) 543–0195
Dr. Joseph A. Malik, Executive Director

Southern Association of Colleges and Schools

Commission on Colleges
1866 Southern Lane, Decatur, GA 30033–4097
(404) 679–4512 or (800) 248–7701
Dr. James T. Rogers, Executive Director

Western Association
of Schools and Colleges

Accrediting Commission for
Senior Colleges and Universities
c/o Mills College, Box 9990,
Oakland, CA 94613–0990
(510) 632–5000
Dr. Stephen S. Weiner, Executive Director

Accrediting Commission on
Community and Junior Colleges
P.O. Box 70, 3060 Valencia Avenue
APTOS, CA 95003
(408) 688-7575
Dr. John C. Petersen, Executive Director

OTHER INSTITUTIONAL ACCREDITING ORGANIZATIONS

Accrediting Association of Bible Colleges
P.O. Box 1523 (130 F North College Avenue)
Fayetteville, AR 72701

Accrediting Council for
Independent Colleges and Schools
750 First Street, NE, Suite 980
Washington, DC 20002–4241

Distance Education and Training Council
1601 - 18th Street, NW
Washington, DC 20009

Accrediting Bureau of
Health Education Schools
29089 U.S. 20 West
Elkhart, IN 46514

Association of Advanced Rabbinical and
Talmudic Schools
175 Fifth Avenuye, Room 711
New York, NY 10010

Association of Theological Schools
in the United States and Canada
10 Summit Park Drive
Pittsburgh, PA 15275–1103

Accrediting Commission for Career
Schools/Colleges of Technology
2101 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 302
Arlington, VA 22201

STATE AGENCIES

Delaware

Delaware Higher Education Commission
820 N. French Street, Wilmington, DE 19801
(302) 577–3240

District of Columbia

Education Institution Licensure Commission
Suite 801, 717 Fourteenth Street, NW
Washington, DC 20005
(202) 727–3511

Maryland

Maryland Higher Education Commission
16 Francis Street, Annapolis, MD 21401
(410) 974–2971

New Jersey

Department of Higher Education
20 W. State Street, CN 542, Trenton, NJ 08625
(609) 292–4310

New York

New York State Education Department
Cultural Education Center, Rm 5B28
Albany, NY 12230
(518) 474–5851

Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania Department of Education
333 Market Street, 12th Floor
Harrisburg, PA 17126–0333
(717) 787–5041

Puerto Rico

Council on Higher Education
UPR Station, Box 23305
San Juan, PR 00931
(809) 758–3350

U.S. Virgin Islands

Department of Education
44–46 Kongens Gade
St. Thomas, USVI 00802
(809) 774–8315

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